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ABSTRACT

Once planners at the local level have specified the educational objectives of their program, they should determine how those objectives can be reached. The possibility of selecting an adequate strategy is improved if several alternative strategies are generated and analyzed before a decision is made. Suggestions for generating alternative strategies include involving those who will have responsibility for implementing, operating, and evaluating the program; making sure participants understand the objectives thoroughly; giving participants free rein to consider any alternatives carefully; using the brainstorming technique to encourage a free and open environment for the process; and utilizing all available information sources. Analysis of the identified alternatives is most successful when it is attempted after all alternatives are identified; when it involves a broad cross section of those who will be using the selected strategies; and when a systematic process for analysis is established allowing comparison of alternatives according to equivalent criteria. The relevance, feasibility, potential effectiveness, and projected viability of the proposed strategies are determined during this analysis. Information developed and reported carefully concerning the qualities of proposed strategies can make final selection easier for the responsible decision maker. (Author/PGD)

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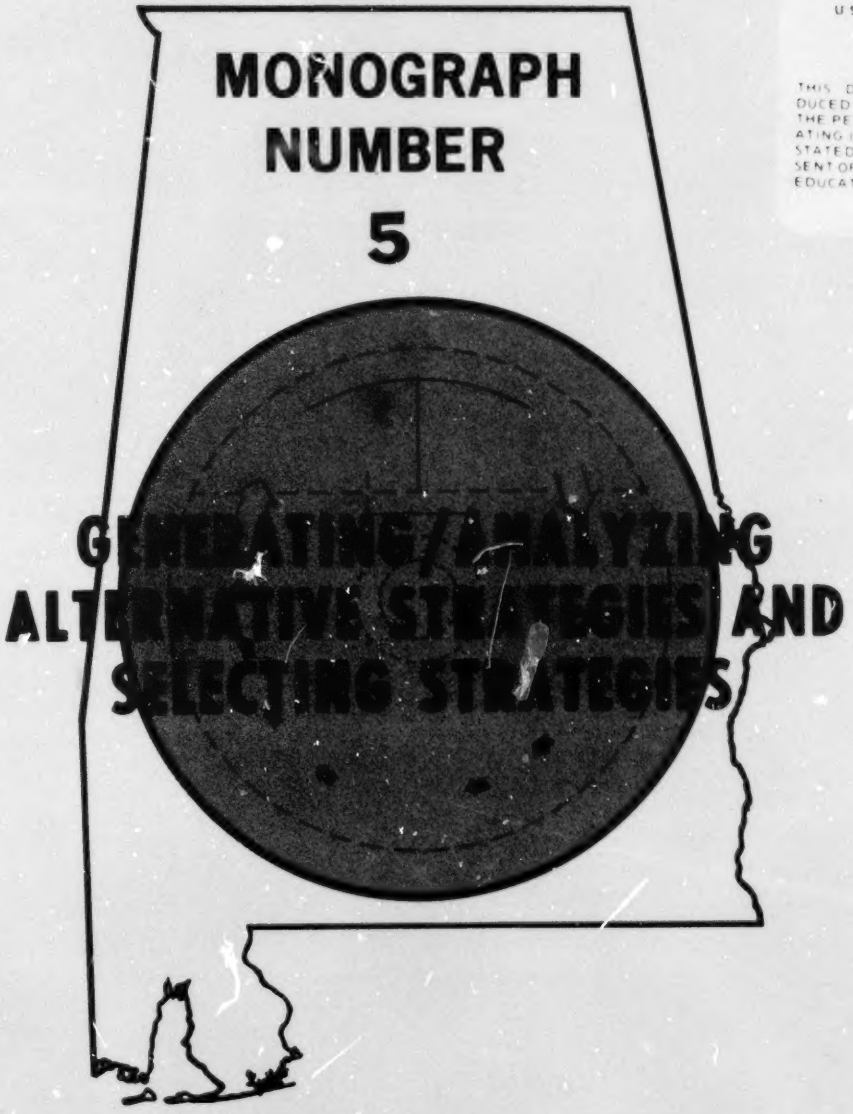

GENERATING/ANALYZING ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES AND SELECTING STRATEGIES

THE OFFICE OF PLANNING AND EVALUATION
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MONOGRAPH NUMBER 5

GENERATING/ANALYZING ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES AND SELECTING STRATEGIES

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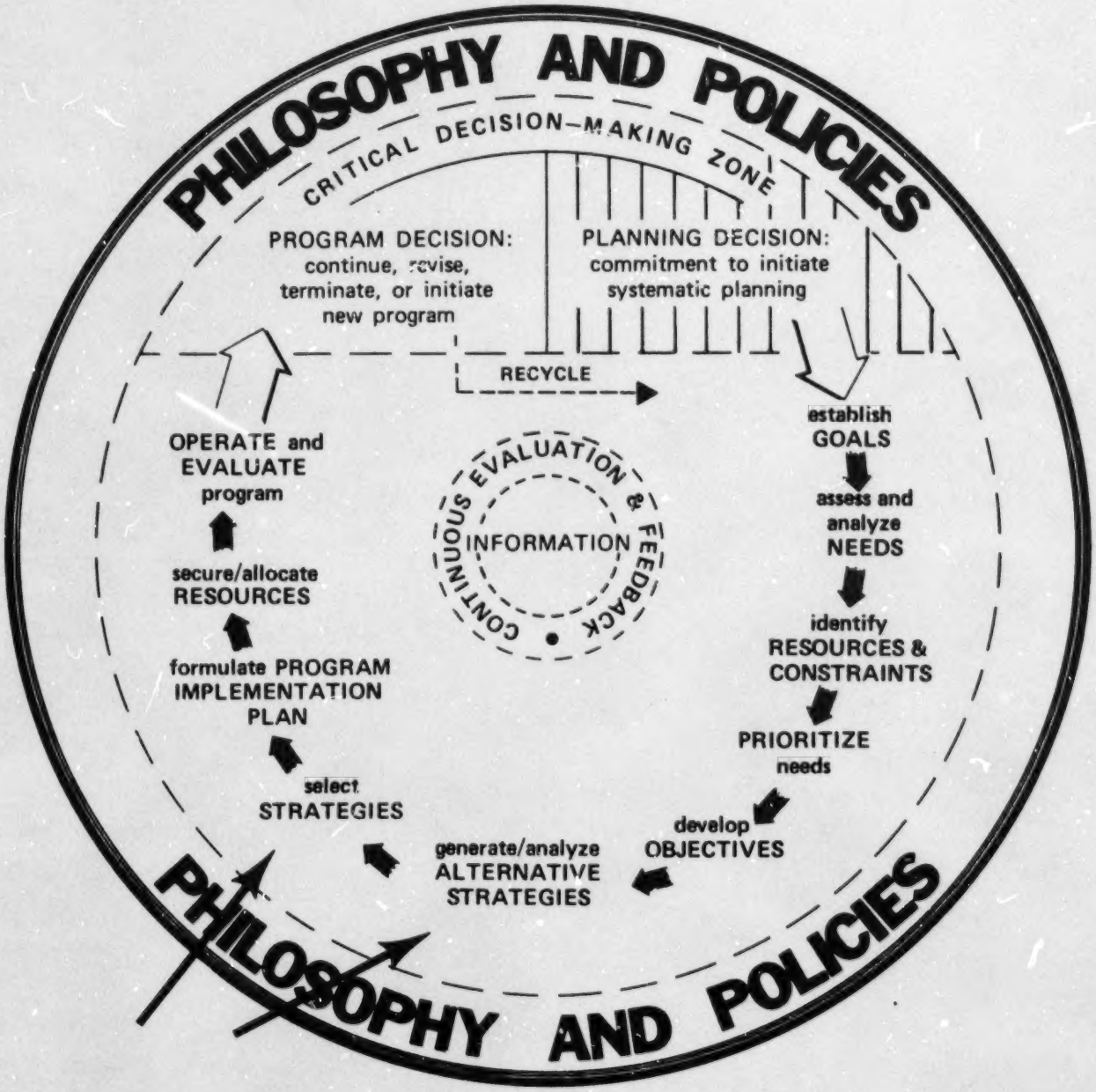

A PLANNING CYCLE

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GENERATING/ANALYZING ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES AND SELECTING STRATEGIES

Generating/Analyzing Alternate Strategies

The objectives development phase should narrow the scope of the planning effort and define the focus of the program that will emerge in the remaining phases of the planning cycle. In particular, the product objectives should have defined the expected or desired outcomes, products, end states and/or benefits to be achieved -- what is to happen as a result of the program that evolves from the planning effort. The next determination to be reached is how the specified outcomes will be attained; that is to say, what strategies -- approach(es), tactic(s), course(s) of action -- will be employed to reach the desired end state? Just as decisions regarding the "what" (objectives) of the program should be made only after a thorough analysis of existing problems and needs, resources and constraints, etc., so the selection of strategies should be preceded by a careful analysis of specified objectives and in-depth consideration of a variety of identified possible strategies. The temptation may be to jump quickly from the specification of objectives to a selection of strategies -- and to forget that there is always more than one way to accomplish a desired end. Through the generation and analysis of alternative strategies for accomplishing each specified objective, this danger can be averted and the probability that the objectives will be achieved in the most effective, efficient, and appropriate manner will be increased.

The generation and analysis of alternative strategies are depicted as one phase in the planning cycle; however, as is obvious, two distinct activities comprise this phase. The first activity, generating alternate ways of attaining a specified product objective, is, of course, prerequisite to the conduct of the second activity, analyzing the alternate strategies which are identified. The strategies emerging from the first activity are not valuable products of the planning process until they have been analyzed carefully. For these reasons, the two activities are linked to form one phase in the planning cycle. On the other hand, these activities should **not** be conducted concurrently. To insure that the maximum number of promising strategies emerge, all possible approaches should be identified prior to the analysis of any one approach. Premature analysis is likely to stifle the creative impulses of those engaged in generating alternatives. In addition, the composition of the groups responsible for conducting these two activities may vary due to the fact that the activities require the application of different kinds of skills and cognitive processes. Suggestions for generating alternative strategies are presented separately from the suggestions for analyzing the alternatives so as to assist those responsible for organizing and managing the planning process in structuring this phase.

Suggestions for Generating Alternative Strategies

1. **Involve individuals who will have responsibility for implementing, operating, and evaluating the proposed program.** During this phase in the planning cycle, it is of utmost importance to assure that those who will be directly responsible for managing and/or operating the program have maximum input. In spite of this obvious need, individuals who may not be directly involved in the program operation should not, however, be automatically excluded. A special effort should be made to identify and involve individuals who are: (a) interested in and committed to achievement of the objectives; (b) open-minded and flexible (not biased, rigid, or judgmental) in their thinking and behavior; (c) capable of creative and conceptual thinking; (d) knowledgeable of current educational theory and practice; and (e) willing to devote time to the task (are not impatient).

2. **Assure that each participant has a thorough understanding of each objective for which strategies are to be generated.** If any of those responsible for generating alternative strategies did not participate in developing objectives or in the other earlier phases in the planning process, they should receive a complete explanation of all previous products of the planning endeavor. It is particularly important that each participant have a working knowledge and understanding of each objective as well as an awareness of the problem being addressed and the major contributing factors.

3. **Give participants free rein to explore all possible alternatives.** Participants may wish to consider the following categories or types of strategies: (a) creative or innovative strategies; (b) strategies which are currently being used or have been used previously within your local system; (c) strategies which have been used successfully by neighboring school systems or by school systems in other parts of the state or nation. Two cautions at this point may assist those responsible for identifying alternative strategies and prevent them from becoming "bogged down" or "going off on a tangent:"

   a. Resist the temptation of "jumping on the latest education bandwagon." Although professional educators should remain alert to innovative practices (strategies), too often we import these innovations to our own local situation without regard to whether they are relevant to our objectives, compatible with our prioritized needs and goals, or appropriate in view of our unique local resources and constraints. In other words, we violate the principles of systematic planning by succumbing to "bandwagonism."

   b. Don't waste your time by "reinventing the wheel." Another pitfall which educational program planners should avoid is the failure to investigate and consider relevant practices (strategies) which have been used successfully and validated by educational researchers or practitioners outside of their own system (or worse yet -- practices which have been used successfully within their

system). This caution is the inverse of the previous one, yet it is not contradictory. If a strategy which would serve one of your objectives has been tested and validated outside of your system, you should consider the possibility of adopting or adapting it to meet your own local needs. Obviously, there are many advantages associated with using a "tried and true" approach. Time and money can be saved, particularly during the planning and developmental stages. In addition, fewer risks may be associated with an already validated practice than with a completely innovative one.

Those responsible for generating alternative strategies (as well as those decision-makers who finally select the strategy(ies) to be used) need to be alert to the dangers inherent in both "bandwagonism" (insistence upon adopting every fad or widely recognized innovation regardless of its appropriateness to your local situation) and "reinventing the wheel" (failure to consider promising practices). The important point is to be certain that the alternative strategies generated do, in fact, relate to agreed upon objectives and that they emerge from the conscientious deliberations of professionals who have critically surveyed current practices, but who have not ruled out the possibility of a completely creative response.

4. **Encourage those responsible for generating alternative strategies to begin this task in a completely free and open environment and to begin by using the brainstorming technique.** "Brainstorming," in this context, refers to the process of open-minded thinking and expression of ideas. The only parameter which should be established is that strategies proposed have some relevance to the objective under examination. During brainstorming sessions, no one member of the responsible group or committee should be allowed to judge or criticize strategies proposed by their colleagues. No analysis or evaluation of alternative strategies is to occur during brainstorming sessions; rather, the purpose is to identify as many promising alternative strategies as possible. All three categories or types of strategies identified above (i.e., creative or innovative strategies, strategies currently or previously used within the system, and strategies used by other school systems) may emerge from brainstorming sessions; however, those engaged in the generation of alternative strategies should not overlook the possibility of a completely creative or innovative strategy. If new approaches do not surface during the brainstorming sessions, they are unlikely to do so later.

5. **Utilize all available information sources to identify strategies which have been successfully utilized in other educational settings.** Those responsible for generating alternative strategies should establish a systematic method for gathering information relative to such strategies. Someone or a group of individuals should be assigned this

responsibility. The following sources might be consulted for this kind of information: (a) current educational literature (e.g. periodicals, indices of educational research such as ERIC etc.), (b) consultants from SDE, state universities, etc.

6. **Develop a listing of all alternative strategies identified.** Provisions should be made to record all alternative strategies generated. None should be discarded at this stage. Each strategy should be accompanied by all available information pertaining to it. A brief synopsis of each identified strategy should be required in order that everyone involved will understand exactly what course of action is being proposed. The specific kinds of information needed for subsequent analysis and evaluation of the strategies will depend upon the criteria for analysis which are established. It may be necessary to collect additional pertinent information during the process of analysis.

Suggestions for Analyzing Alternative Strategies

1. **Do not analyze any one strategy(ies) until all possible alternatives have been generated.** Although this point has already been stressed, it cannot be overemphasized. As previously stated, those responsible for organizing and directing the planning effort should take steps to insure that analysis is not conducted concurrently with the identification of the strategies. How can this be accomplished? Analysis of alternatives should not be undertaken at the same time that they are generated (i.e., during the same meeting or on the same day). The composition of the group responsible for analysis may differ (even if but slightly) from that group which has identified the various alternatives. (This idea will be explored in the following sections.) Those directing the planning endeavor will think of other effective ways to guarantee that analysis of strategies is conducted independently of previous activities in this phase.

2. **Involve a broad cross section of individuals in the analysis of alternative strategies.** Again, care should be taken to insure that those who will eventually implement selected strategies have input here. The same individuals who were involved in the generation of the strategies may have responsibility at this point; on the other hand, an entirely different group may be assigned responsibility. A third possibility would be to constitute a new committee comprised of some who participated in identifying the strategies and others who did not. The composition of this committee will be dictated by unique local characterisitics and concerns. An attempt should be made, however, to involve individuals who will proceed in an analytical, organized, and systematic fashion.

3. **Adopt a systematic process for analysis which incorporates one or more carefully selected sets of criteria by which to assess each identified strategy.** If procedures and criteria are established prior to analysis, each strategy can be analyzed in as objective a manner as possible. Failure to make such preliminary decisions may allow the analysis process to degenerate into either a shouting contest charged with emotion and biases (with the one yelling the loudest prevailing); or a perfunctory

exercise led by one dominant individual; or a futile, fruitless attempt because no one knows just what to do; or .... The purpose of this analysis is to provide information and possibly recommendations which can be used by the decision-makers who will be responsible for selecting strategies in the next phase. This fact increases the necessity and importance of specifying the criteria for analysis and organizing the information collected during this phase in an understandable and concise format.

One format for analysis is presented below. This suggested format incorporates a number of significant considerations that should characterize any thorough analysis. Although this format may not be altogether appropriate for your local needs, you should be able to adapt certain portions for your own use.

Suggested Format for Analysis

First Level Analysis

The primary reason for breaking the analysis process into two levels is a practical one: there is no need to use valuable time collecting information and conducting an in-depth analysis for a strategy that is neither relevant nor feasible. Rather, it is only sensible for those responsible for analyzing alternative strategies to cull from the list of alternatives those failing to meet some rather basic criteria. The criteria associated with the first level analysis relate to: (1) the **relevance** of the strategy to the specified objective and identified need and goal from which the objective was derived, and (2) the **feasibility** of the strategy. These two criteria should be applied to each of the strategies previously identified. If a particular strategy fails to pass **either** the relevancy **or** the feasibility test, it may be eliminated at this point.

During the first level analysis each proposed strategy is to be examined on its own merit; that is to say, the relevancy and/or feasibility of one given strategy should not be compared to those of another. No strategy should be discarded because it appears "less relevant" or "less feasible" than others. (These types of comparisons will be made by those responsible for selecting strategies during the next phase.) Rather, only those strategies which fail to meet some rather absolute tests relative to these criteria should be eliminated as a result of the first level analysis. It may be that all of the proposed strategies will pass the initial relevancy and feasibility tests and that, as a consequence, none will be eliminated at this point. Those responsible for this analysis should not feel compelled to eliminate any strategy during this initial examination.

1. Is the proposed strategy **relevant** to the specified objective and to the need and goal from which the objective was derived? This question may be answered for each proposed strategy by use of a simple check list. Remember that the criterion in

question is not the degree or extent of effectiveness in objective attainment that may be expected through utilization of a particular strategy; rather, the criterion deals with the logical relationship between the strategy and the specified objective. Positive answers to all of the following kinds of questions would indicate that such a logical relationship does indeed, exist. A negative answer to any one of the following questions should eliminate the strategy from subsequent consideration.

a. Will implementation of the proposed strategy have a direct impact upon the individuals who are to exhibit the behavior defined in the product objective?

b. Does the proposed strategy focus upon the kind of behavior which is specified in the product objective?

c. Can the proposed strategy be conducted within the time parameters established in the product objective?**(**NOTE: The time parameters incorporated in the product objective may be flexible and subject to modification; if so, this should be considered in answering this particular question. On the other hand, the time limitations specified in the objective may be rigid requirements, e.g. as in an instructional program designed particularly for 12th grade students that cannot be carried over to another school year, etc. In such a case, a strategy requiring an excessive amount of time would not be relevant to the objective.)

2. **Is the proposed strategy feasible?** Would it be possible to utilize the strategy in your local situation? Some "experts" might argue that the feasibility question should not be addressed at this juncture in the planning process; that all considerations of feasibility should be delayed to a later point in the analysis. They might suggest that a promising alternative could be eliminated prematurely by focusing upon cost and capability without concurrently considering the potential effectiveness of the strategy. This danger is real and inherent; however, it can be averted if those responsible for this analysis are careful to limit its scope and if they understand the purpose of this initial consideration of feasibility. Just as was the case with the relevancy issue, the function at this stage is simply to determine if further analysis is warrented: to eliminate only those strategies which the system could not implement even if they were accompanied by a "money back guarantee." During this particular assessment of each proposed strategy, two important ground rules should be observed: (1) The purpose of this preliminary analysis is to collect sufficient data regarding the resource requirements of each proposed strategy to make a tentative judgment as to whether your organization is capable of implementing the given strategy. Only those strategies which could not possibly be implemented (even given reallocation of resources, acquisition of new resources, etc.) should be eliminated at this stage. If the answer to the question, -- "Is the proposed

strategy feasible? – is "Maybe," the strategy should not be discarded at this point. (2) The feasibility analysis should focus on only one proposed strategy at a time. The temptation to consider the "relative" or "comparative" feasibility of one strategy in relation to another or others should be resisted; that is to say, the projected cost and other required support of one strategy should not be compared to that of another.

The feasibility analysis of each proposed strategy should begin with the identification of those factors or conditions which are necessary, vital or essential to its implementation. A caution: Do not confuse the vital or essential factors and conditions with those which would be desirable or optimal. In other words, focus upon those factors which are fundamental to the implementation of a strategy, not upon those which could be classified as "frills." Consideration of the questions listed below may facilitate this process. Another caution: Because each strategy will have its own unique set of attributes or characteristics, the following listing should not be viewed as exhaustive or definitive. The analysts should be alert to peculiar features of any given strategy that might necessitate extraordinary demands or requirements. Answers to the following questions should, however, provide information basic to any study of feasibility.

a. What kinds and quantities of resources will be required for implementation and operation of the proposed strategy? (An estimate of the total monetary cost of the strategy should emerge from this assessment.)

   (1) Personnel requirements -- type and quantity?

   (2) Equipment requirements -- type and quantity?

   (3) Facility requirements -- type and quantity?

   (4) Supplies and materials -- type and quantity?

   (5) Miscellaneous expenses -- type and quantity?

b. Will implementation and operation of the proposed strategy require any extraordinary type of support? (If any of the following kinds of support suggest the need for additional resource commitments, the projections made in number one above should be amended to include these resources. The primary reason for including this particular question within the feasibility study is to assure that proper consideration is given to the kind or quality of support needed to implement and operate each given strategy.)

(1) Staff training?

(2) Administrative commitment?

(3) Community support?

c. Does the proposed strategy involve any practice, procedure, etc. regulated by an existing Federal, state or local law, policy, rule, regulation and/or court ruling?

(1) If the answer to the above question is affirmative, does the applicable law, policy, etc., prohibit the proposed strategy?

(2) If the answer to question c-(1) is affirmative, can action be initiated that would lead to the removal of the legal prohibition in time for implementation of the strategy?

(3) If the answer to question c-(2) is an unconditional "no," the strategy may be eliminated from further consideration.

Following the identification of those factors and/or conditions requisite to the implementation and operation of a given strategy (in a. and b. above), those conducting the feasibility study must determine if their organization can provide reasonable assurance that these factors and/or conditions exist or can be delivered in time to implement and operate the proposed strategy. The information gathered during an earlier phase of the planning cycle ("Identifying Resources and Constraints") should be useful in making these determinations. If those participating in this analysis conclude that the essential factors and/or conditions associated with a given strategy cannot under any circumstances be delivered by their organization, they will be justified in eliminating that particular strategy from further consideration.

Second Level Analysis

Those strategies which have been tentatively established as relevant and feasible can now be subjected to a more rigorous analysis. At least two criteria or standards should be considered at this juncture: (1) the potential effectiveness of each proposed strategy, and (2) the projected viability of each proposed strategy in your unique, local situation. Do not rush through this stage of the analysis and thereby render rash judgments concerning the relative merits or liabilities of given strategies in relation to these two standards. This stage of the analysis process should result in neither the elimination of a strategy nor a premature decision as to the "best" strategy. Rather, the analysis should be so designed and structured as to produce information which is both relevant and complete and which is presented in such a manner that it will be understandable and useful to the decision-makers who will ultimately select the strategy(ies) for implementation.

At least three discrete tasks confront those involved in this analysis: (1) identifying the critical indicators of effectiveness and viability upon which the information gathering and reporting efforts will focus, (2) using the identified indicators as a framework for the conduct of thorough research and systematic projections regarding each proposed strategy, and (3) assuring that as an end result each proposed strategy is described in as complete and uniform a manner as possible.

1. **Identifying the Critical Indicators.** While everyone will probably agree that both effectiveness and viability are legitimate criteria for analysis, these two concepts will likely mean different things to different individuals. It is important, therefore, that those engaged in this stage of the analysis arrive at a common understanding and definition of these two criteria. The approach suggested below is offered for your consideration.

   a. **Gauging the Potential Effectiveness of a Strategy.** One way of gauging the potential effectiveness of a given strategy is to answer the following question: Under optimal conditions (i.e., with adequate human and material resources, acceptance and support, etc.), is implementation of the strategy likely to lead to the attainment of the specified objective? The task at this point is to examine the inherent value or worth of the strategy itself--without reference to outside, intervening variables. This task can be facilitated by recognition of some critical indicators of effectiveness. The indicators listed below, while not all-inclusive, should be relevant to most deliberations concerning effectiveness.

      (1) **Past Performance.** If the strategy under consideration has been used previously in your own or another school system, you will be well-advised to examine what happened as a result. Was the strategy appropriate for its objective(s)? Was it successful in achieving its objective(s)? These are questions which should have been answered through some evaluation process, and the logical source to consult would be, of course, the evaluation report (if the program and component strategy were indeed formally evaluated). You may also wish to communicate with the program director and other individual(s) who were responsible for implementing the strategy. If the strategy has been widely used, you will want to find out its "track record." How many times has the strategy been utilized? How many times has it succeeded? Failed? Remember that data relative to past performance is pertinent only if the strategy was used to achieve an objective which was the same as or closely related to your own specified objective.

      (2) **Adaptability.** If the strategy has been utilized in another educational setting, you should determine if the strategy is adaptable to your own local situation. Was the past success of the strategy highly dependent upon

one individual? Was the strategy closely related to one or more other strategies; if so, can the strategy stand alone? Would its effectiveness be diminished by its isolation from companion strategies?

(3) **Risks.** Are there any extraordinary risks associated with the strategy? What will be the consequences of failure?

(4) **Spin-off effects.** Will implementation of the strategy have an impact upon other operating programs? If so, will this conflict in any manner with any goal or objective of your system? Does the strategy complement other goals or objectives? Be certain to identify both the positive and the negative side effects. If the strategy has been utilized previously, consult those involved for assistance in answering these questions. If the strategy is completely innovative, you will have to rely upon deductive reasoning to identify possible side effects.

(5) **Adequacy.** Will implementation of the strategy lead directly to satisfactory attainment of the specified objective, or will it be necessary to use supplementary and complementary strategies to fully achieve the related objective?

b. **Gauging the Viability of a Strategy.**

Used in this context viability is defined as "being capable of growing or developing." Therefore, the determination of viability is closely related to the factors of:

(1) **Appropriateness.** Is this strategy right (appropriate) for the objectives, the people, the circumstances and the setting?

(2) **Compatibility.** Can the strategy be installed and operated smoothly without curtailing or disrupting other programs and activities?

(3) **Acceptance.** Will the strategy be accepted by the people who are affected by it? (Students, teachers, administrators, parents, board members, community, etc.)

These questions can best be answered by mature, reflective people who are thoroughly familiar with the proposed strategy and the context in which it will operate.

If each of these three questions can be answered in the affirmative, it is reasonable to assume that the proposed strategy meets the criteria of viability; given the proper implementation and management, the strategy can grow and can be developed in a manner to achieve the objectives satisfactorily.

Strategy analysis activities should culminate in a listing, in priority order, of proposed strategies that have successfully passed the tests of first and second level analysis. The planning group should prepare a written description of each strategy which includes their assessment of its chances for success. This should be stated in terms of strengths, weaknesses, spin-off effects, cost effectiveness, etc.

The objective is to provide the superintendent, the school board and other decision-makers sufficient information to select the most feasible strategy for achieving desired results.

The procedures recommended herein require time, resources and a great deal of work by capable people. However, the payoff comes in terms of carefully planned programs and informed decisions which result in improved educational opportunities and better instructional programs.

Selecting Strategies

The selection of strategies for implementation is the prerogative and the responsibility of the decision-maker. It is both difficult and unwise to generalize about the actual selection process. Each board of education, each teacher, each superintendent, indeed, each decision-maker, irrespective of his/her position or level in the school system, makes judgements and reaches decisions based upon his/her own unique value system, background (knowledge, experience, education, etc.) and frame of reference.

It has been said that, "given good information, most responsible people will make the right decision." Assuming that the planning group has done its job properly, the decision maker has been given the best information available. After careful consideration of the recommendations and supporting information, the decision-maker may choose one of several courses of action. The most obvious of these are:

- Adopt one of the recommended strategies

- Reject all recommended strategies
- Synthesize a strategy by combining parts from two or more of the recommended strategies.
- Adopt his/her own strategy
- Send the planning group back to the drawing board
- Take no action at all

Suffice it to say that it is incumbent upon the decision-maker to act in a responsible manner. It is very unlikely that any responsible person would initiate/authorize the planning process which has progressed to this point and fail to take appropriate action on the results.